

HOW WOMEN PAVE THE WAY

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

This issue is dedicated by the Prero family l'ilui nishmas Rus Elisheva a"h bas R' Chaim Ozer, whose yarhtzeit is 10 Sivan.

At the beginning of the month of Sivan, the third month after the exodus from Egypt, Moshe went up Mt. Sinai. Hashem told Moshe "So you shall say to the house of Yaakov and relate to the children of Israel: You have seen what I did to Egypt...if you listen well to my voice and observe my covenant, you shall be to me the most beloved treasure of all people. . . ." (Shemos 19:4-6). This communication concerned whether the nation of Israel would be willing to accept the Torah - and Hashem was instructing Moshe what should be said to the people. Hashem told Moshe to speak to two groups of people: the house of Yaakov and the children of Israel. Who were these two groups? Rashi explains that these two groups were the women and the men, respectively, and they were to be spoken to in the order set forth in the verse: women first, then men.

Dayan Yisroel Yaakov Fisher asks why Moshe had to speak to the women first. Women are not obligated to learn Torah, and are not obligated to observe many of the mitzvos. Why did they need to be approached first? What makes this query even more confounding is the reason the Medrash Rabbah gives for why the women were spoken to first: so that they could properly guide their children to Torah. The obligation to teach one's children Torah is an obligation on the father, not on the mother! Yet, the women were to be first. There is a clear stress on the role of women as it relates to Torah. What is the Torah coming to teach us?

Dayan Fisher notes that there was more to the acceptance of the Torah by the nation of Israel than meets the eye. Rashi, on the verses immediately preceding those cited above, explains that the nation of Israel arrived at Mt. Sinai with a spirit of repentance. Because of that, Dayan Fisher says, we are told that the nation camped at Mt. Sinai with a spirit of unity - like one man, with one heart - with no fighting or discord. The appearance of this special harmony immediately before the giving of the Torah was not coincidental.

The nation's unity was not solely compared to "one man." Rather, the nation was like "one man with one heart." "Like one man" alludes to the fact that no one person can possibly observe the entire Torah in isolation. Mitzvah observance is a joint effort, requiring collaboration and cooperation. One

needs the poor to receive his charity; one needs his fellow man to love as himself. Not every man has a field from which he can allot the corner and that forgotten from the harvest to the poor. Most people are not Kohanim, who have special observances and commandments. Yet, if there is unity, and the nation acts together as one, when one person does a specific mitzvah, it is if he is doing it for everyone - as everyone else is really himself as well. In that collective fashion, everyone in the nation of Israel can perform all of the Mitzvos.

However, this unity in action, "like one man," needs another essential component - "with one heart." Each individual has to be of like heart and intention: to serve Hashem and be subservient to His will. If each person pursues his own desires and passions, jealousy and envy are inevitable, and that leads to fights and divisions within the nation. If each person relegates his personal drives and desires to a secondary position, behind the desire to serve G-d and observe His dictates, unity of heart can be accomplished. Having an entire nation acting in concert to uphold the word of G-d is only possible when the entire nation shares that as their ultimate goal. That is the meaning of "with one heart."

The nation of Israel was only ready to accept the Torah when they reached this dual level of togetherness: unity in brotherhood, and unity in purpose, "like one man, with one heart."

Who teaches a baby to say the prayer of Modeh Ani in the morning? Who is the individual who first instructs a young child to say blessings? Who is the person who explains the special ritual of lighting the Shabbos candles to a wide-eyed youngster? Most often, it is the mother. The mother, being the one to spend more time with the child in his or her formative years, is the one who imparts the first lessons concerning Torah, mitzvos, and the proper way to act and conduct one's self. The mother teaches her child to share with others, and to say please and thank you.

In Tehillim (128) we find the following "guarantee:" "Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your house; your children like olive shoots around your table." If a mother watches over, guides, and tends to her children like one would to a fruitful vine - with constant pruning, nurturing, and caring - it is guaranteed that her children will be like the blessed and desired olive. The mother has a powerful role in the development of her child. The development of a child into a true ben or bas Torah depends on the foundation laid for that child by the mother.

Are women obligated to learn and study Torah? No. Are women required to perform all the mitzvos? No. Is the responsibility to teach one's child Torah incumbent upon women? No. However, women, mothers, are the individuals who educate each member of the nation of Israel, in his or her youth, as to what it means to be "like one person, with one heart." Women instill in their children the importance of loving one's fellow man and the importance of loving G-d. The nation of Israel was not ready for the acceptance of the Torah until they could be considered "like one man, with one heart."

Because women are the individuals who primarily impart this philosophy essential to the continuity of the nation of Israel, they were addressed first by Moshe. Hashem was explicitly indicating that women play the vital role in preparing the next generation for the acceptance of the Torah - and therefore, they needed to be the first group with whom Moshe communicated regarding Torah.